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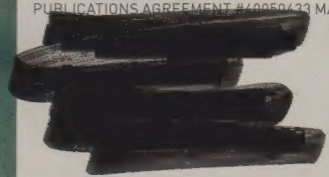
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TO CHALLENGE
THE CLASS LEADERS?

→ CORVETTE AND SL
TWO DROPTOP ICONS
TURN 50, BUT LOOK
AS GOOD AS EVER

CITY SLICKER!

**TOYOTA'S NEW \$13,000
ECHO HATCHBACK IS
A BLAST TO DRIVE –
AND IS JUST FOR CANADA**

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(HATCH)BACK WHERE IT STARTED



STORY BY LAURANCE YAP
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LA FAVE
AND LAURANCE YAP



TOYOTA HAS ALWAYS SOLD THE ECHO AS A HATCH IN THE REST OF THE WORLD. FOUR YEARS LATER, IT'S HERE

THERE ARE TWO major landmarks in Kingston, the city that Toyota Canada chose for the press launch of its new-for-'04 Echo hatchback. First is Queen's university, one of the country's best schools, and the other is a maximum-security prison used to house some of this country's most dangerous offenders.

Interestingly enough, both of these places contribute to the Echo hatchback's story.

The university connection is obvious, given the Echo's compact size and pricing, which will start at under \$13,000 for a three-door hatch, rising to \$18,000 or so for a fully-loaded five-door. The Echo's a natural for students, with tons of room, a good array of standard features, Toyota reliability (because your first car will inevitably be the one you keep longest as you try to gain a foothold in life) and impressive fuel economy, not to mention reasonable insurance.

But, at least until now, a lot of those students considered having to drive an Echo something of a punishment, a judgment they foisted on the car largely because of its bubble-butt styling. I had many friends that went to Queens, to whom, when they were shopping for a car, I recommended Echos, but who immediately scratched it from their lists upon seeing that jacked-up rear end.

The most unkind of them — who all went on to buy dynamically-inferior domestics with horribly plastic interiors and grumbling engines — suggested it looked like a pregnant baboon; kinder (and smarter) ones just

decided the trunk looked, well, tacked-on.

In effect, they were right. Everywhere else in the world, where the Echo is sold as the Yaris and Vitz, it is a hatchback — the two- and four-door sedan versions were introduced later, specifically for hatchophobic North Americans. In order to fit in a reasonable amount of luggage space, the trunk *had* to be that high, and it had to have the proportions it did to make loading easy. That said proportions were, well, ugly, isn't Toyota's fault.

Which isn't to say that the Echo hasn't done well anyway; it's the best-selling subcompact sedan in Canada and enjoys particular popularity with older drivers, who not only appreciate its excellent value (important in a world where social security is looking less and less secure) but also the ease of entry and exit afforded by its massive doors, high-set seats, and low floor. It's just that the Echo hasn't caught on with the young buyers it was most specifically designed for. And that's partly why Toyota is siring, in the States, an all-new, all-hatch brand called Scion, whose two models are both based on the Echo's platform.

Though we won't get the Scions here, the Echo hatch is, to my eyes, even better than the next-best thing; it's cuter than the Scions, with its bubbly eyes and curved side glass, with all the versatility and adaptability you'd expect of a hatch, all packed into a smaller footprint than the already-diminutive sedan. And the hatch showcases the action-jackson wheel-at-each-corner stance the car was supposed to

have in the first place.

Not much has changed inside, and neither did much need to — the Echo has always had one of the roomiest and most versatile small-car cabins there is. The seating position is upright and comfortable, and you face a chunky three-spoke tilt steering wheel. The instruments are centrally positioned, which takes some getting used to, but in the end they live up to Toyota's claim of diverting your eyes less from the road.

Simple-to-use climate and radio controls are flanked on the dash by two huge storage bins that can hold a dozen CDs, and there are numerous other useful compartments inside, including a double glovebox, a cavernous console bin, big door pockets, and even trays on the floor outboard of the seats, for pens, parking tickets, and other detritus.

As befits its younger, more-aggressive positioning, Toyota will offer almost 50 different accessories and upgrades for Echo hatches right from the beginning. In addition to the usual bits like window deflectors, alarm systems and floor mats, will be some options targeted specifically at sport-compact tuner types, including fog lights, enlarged alloy wheels, spoilers, and a performance exhaust system by Borla.

No audio system is installed at the factory; dealers will fit the customer's choice of four audio systems, ranging from a basic cassette unit (included in the base price) to an easy-to-use AM/FM/CD/MP3 player. But that's just the start, as the plan is to eventually bring over almost

TOYOTA ECHO CE HATCHBACK 3-DOOR

ENGINE: L4, 1500 cc.
VALVETRAIN: DOHC, 16V, VVT.
MAX HP @ RPM: 108 @ 6000.
MAX LB-FT @ RPM: 105 @ 4,200.
TRANSMISSION: FWD, 5-speed manual.
SUSPENSION: Front macpherson struts, coil springs, stabilizer bar; rear torsion beam, coil springs.
BRAKES: Discs/drums, ABS.
STEERING: Manual rack and pinion.
WHEELS: 5.5 x 14 in.
TIRES: 175/65R14.
LENGTH x WIDTH, MM (IN.): 3,733 x 1,650 (147 x 65).
CURB WEIGHT, KG (LBS.): 944 (2,080).
CITY/HWY L/100 KM (MPG): 6.6/5.1 (43/55).



all of the Toyota performance bits offered for the Echo platform in other parts of the world — in a few months you'll have the option of different springs and sway bars, and within a year there will probably be a turbo upgrade based on the Japan-market Vitz RS Turbo.

Certainly, drivers who wish to customize their Echo hatches will have a great basic car to start with. Weighing just 944 kg, the three-door makes the most of its 1.5-litre VVT-i four's 108 hp, zipping smartly up to speed and cruising on the highway with surprising refinement. The standard five-speed shifter has a notchy but precise feel, the brakes have fine stopping power allied to a firm pedal, and the steering is quick and accurate, with plenty of feel.

Even on its standard suspension and 14-inch tires, the Echo holds the road and corners flatter than you might expect given its tall-boy looks, and our test unit could maintain surprising momentum on the two winding roads bisecting Wolfe Island,

a half-hour ferry ride from Kingston. Thanks to the fluidity of the controls and the lightness of the body, slowing down for corners is rarely necessary; you just bung the little car into a turn and keep zipping merrily along. Low emissions and excellent fuel economy — 6.6/5.1 L/100 km on the city and highway cycles — are a given.

Which just goes to show that adept tuning goes a long way to making a car perform well. The Echo hatch's underpinnings, like the sedan's, are fairly prosaic economy-car fare. The brakes are discs at the front, drums in the rear, though with standard ABS across the board — way to go, Toyota! The suspension is a simple front-strut-rear-torsion-beam arrangement. But it's allied to a stiff structure — with high-strength steel panels, side-impact door beams, and numerous frame reinforcements specific to the Canadian market — and means the Echo rides with an uncommon suppleness while maintaining surprising

cornering ability; it also has the side benefit of impressive crash performance as well, the car in its European form having scored four stars on the Euro-NCAP front-impact test.

A teacher of mine once referred to his beloved Toyota Tercel hatch as a "sewing machine," which is ironic because the new three- and five-door Echos are actually built at the company's Nagakusa facility, which opened for business in 1926 under the name "Toyoda Automatic Loom Works Limited."

With its small size and smooth, revvy engine, it wouldn't be an insult to call the new Echo hatch a sewing machine, but thanks to its funky styling and its cleverly laid-out interior, it's now a car with a lot more personality than a common appliance. Pricing, however, should please buyers with utilitarian sensibilities. The base three-door CE hatch starts at just \$12,995 (albeit without even power steering); the five-door LE goes for \$15,600 and

the sporty five-door RS goes for \$16,300. A \$970 package adds power steering and a rear washer/wiper to the base three-door, and various other option packages, delivering varying combos of air conditioning, cruise control, and styling bits, are available, raising the price of a full-jam RS to just under \$18,000.

With its cool tall-but-small package and that cheeky styling, it's clear that driving an Echo isn't a punishment — not that it ever was — and now its style, comfort, refinement, and entertaining driving dynamics make it one econobox that isn't a penalty box.

Whether it will appeal to the university set that Toyota so wants is something only time will tell, but the reaction the little car got in and around the Queen's campus must have been encouraging for its creators and marketers.

Let's hope that's the case. If it does, we here want to be first on the list to drive an RS Turbo.